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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between outdoor recreation and environmental education. Observations of resident environmental education centers in Minnesota and of recreational programs on U.S. Forest Service lands found that, to the extent that planned and unplanned outcomes can be equated, the two types of programs seemed to produce the same results: increased environmental awareness and improved recreational skills. Teachers in the outdoors and recreators teaching people to enjoy the outdoors have an interest in helping participants to better understand the environment, if only to protect the resources on which all rely. The impact of outdoor and adventure programs on the individual provides an ideal opportunity for environmental learning. Nine steps for including environmental education in outdoor recreation programs include deliberate planning of environmental education elements, creating a program philosophy of environmental harmony, encouraging a sense of awe and respect for natural environments, promoting a level of comfort with the outdoors, teaching and living minimum-impact philosophy and techniques, emphasizing relationships between personal behavior and environmental consequences, weaving small environmental lessons into all program aspects, utilizing available environmental education resources, and avoiding portrayal of the environment as an adversary to overcome. On the other hand, infusing recreation into environmental education programs can help students adjust to the outdoors, turn abstract information into concrete experience, provide outdoor skills, and make learning fun. Contains 24 references and suggested readings. (SV)

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WHEN BAMBI MEETS GODZILLA:
Bringing Environmental Education and Outdoor Recreation Together

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Abstract

Can (and should) outdoor recreation serve as a vehicle for environmental education? Can (and should) environmental programs also teach recreational skills? The relationship between outdoor recreation and environmental education is examined. Suggestions for incorporating environmental education into outdoor and adventure programs, and suggestions for incorporating recreational activities into environmental education programs are offered.

Background & Introduction

In 1988, two different things sparked my interest in the interconnections between outdoor recreation and outdoor education -- or, more specifically, between outdoor recreation and environmental education.

First, I was involved in setting up a study, for the Minnesota Department of Education, intended to examine the role of resident education centers in meeting Minnesota's curriculum guidelines on environmental education (Parker & McAvoy, 1988). This study made an effort to look at some of the "basics" in environmental education programming, and its findings made me look at the benefits of outdoor programs in general. In looking at educational programming at residential environmental education centers in Minnesota, I realized that while environmental education is focused on educational outcomes, it often results in recreational outcomes as well (see Schatz & Parker, 1995, Schatz, McAvoy & Parker, 1993).

Later in the year, I met with the US Forest Service to discuss the development of visitor education materials for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. In looking at the educational needs of the US Forest Service in the BWCA, I realized that outdoor living skills are not the only appropriate focus of outdoor recreation, because skills can not exist outside the context of their application. It is impossible, I think, to teach minimum impact camping without some reference to the processes of environmental degradation the techniques are intended to minimize. While outdoor recreation is focused on recreational outcomes, it usually results in some education, too.

To the extent that planned and unplanned outcomes can be equated, the two types of programs seem to produce the same results. There is really nothing new in this understanding. Education and recreation, after all, share the same linguistic and conceptual roots; and the idea that education and recreation share common ground is also well supported in our professional literature (Atkinson, 1990; Ewert, 1989; Ford, 1981). Education and recreation do seem to fit together in outdoor programs -- especially in programs emphasizing environmental awareness and environmental ethics -- and what I have found in the literature seems to support my conclusions concerning the basic relationship between recreation and education. I should be satisfied, but every time I pick up this material I realize I'm not. I still haven't been able to fully answer what seem to be two

RC 020928

very basic questions: (1) How close is the relationship between outdoor recreation and environmental education?; and (2) How can the two best be integrated?

Including Environmental Education in Outdoor Recreation Programs

In a rather simplistic view, "environmental education" refers to programs or processes where we are trying to help participants develop: (1) improved knowledge about the "natural" environment; and (2) an understanding of how human and non-human elements of that world are interrelated.

Outdoor adventure programs -- the outdoor recreation addressed here -- included experiences or activities where people are lead through a series of tasks with the aim of creating personal growth and group development, or of teaching outdoor living skills (Schatz, McAvoy & Parker, 1992). To the extent that they are focused on relationships at all, these programs are focused on human-human interactions (helping participants to develop a better understanding of how they relate to themselves or to other people) rather than on the relationships between humans and the non-human environment.

Given these different emphases: Can, or should, those of us involved in outdoor adventure programs -- like ropes courses, canoe trips, and outward bound programs -- incorporate environmental education into the experiences we provide?

Rationale

As teachers in the outdoors, or as recreators teaching people to enjoy the outdoors, we have an interest in helping our participants better understand the environment -- if only to protect the resources on which we rely. We should, therefore, be very interested in environmental literacy, and we have a sound justification for including environmental education in our outdoor programs. Doing so can help to create a more environmentally literate society. This is especially appropriate, because it is impossible for participants to use the skills we provide them without some contact with the outdoors -- skills do not get applied in a vacuum.

Another important consideration, I think, is that during outdoor recreation activities, we have our participants attention. In educational programs, it is often difficult to command enough attention to facilitate learning, but, it is very difficult to be vague when you're stepping onto a ropes course or into a kayak for the first time. This gives those of us involved in outdoor recreation pursuits an ideal opportunity to teach. One of the major rationales for including environmental education in our recreation programs is, then, "because we can."

In addition, adventure recreation presents effective learning opportunities. Field trips -- time spent in the "natural" world -- offer potential for very rich laboratory experiences. We know from research and personal experience that our programs can have a major personal impact, so why not take advantage of the opportunity and include an environmental context or laboratory experience in the rich and rewarding personal recreative experiences we help to provide?

Steps for Action

Dr. Leo McAvoy, at the University of Minnesota, has identified nine steps we can take toward incorporating environmental education into our outdoor recreation programs (Schatz, McAvoy & Parker, 1993, 1992).

1) Plan for environmental education, don't relegate it to the role of an "incidental outcome."

If we want to ensure that education occurs, we need to treat it as an important consideration in all planning decisions. If we include it in our mission statements, and make it a planned objective of our programs, we can justify the staff, time, and effort required to make education happen.

2) Create a philosophy of environmental harmony in programs and operations.

Our whole program should be operated in a way that fits with its environment and its environmental principles. Ask questions like, "Does our septic system drain into a lake?;" "Do we actively practice the three R's?;" and, "Did we create an environmental disaster by clear cutting 50 trees to put up a ropes course?" If we don't practice what we are trying to teach, if we fail to convey a consistent message, we are not laying the ground for successful learning.

3) Encourage a sense of awe and respect for natural environments.

Outdoor environments are unique and special places -- like the Louvre, the White House, and Wriggley Field. If we were to take a group to those places, they would not likely consider going to the bathroom on the lawn, throwing trash on the ground, or singing loudly in the hallways because they like the echo. In a wilderness setting or an urban one, the elements that comprise the environment are memorials to the life that surrounds us, and that life is deserving of respect.

4) Promote a level of comfort with the environment.

Many of our participants live in urban environments and see the outdoors as a "different place." They wonder about it, have concerns about it, have fears about it, and feel uncomfortable there. If our participants feel uncomfortable in the outdoors, they will have a very hard time focusing on anything other than their own discomfort, and stand little chance of ever learning to enjoy or appreciate the natural environment as a thing of beauty.

If our programs are poorly planned (or poorly executed), or if our participants don't eat well or dress appropriately, environmentally friendly behavior is often relegated to a position of secondary importance. Participants in a camping program, for example, will not appreciate the need to practice minimum impact techniques if they are cold, wet, and hungry. They'll want a big fire -- perhaps need one -- regardless of the impact on the environment. Physically comfortable participants, in contrast, may be more willing to participate in a discussion of the impact of fires -- even small ones -- on the camping environment, and may be content to sit around a candle lantern in the evening.

Emotional comfort is also an important consideration. Giving program participants an opportunity to acclimatize, to get used to the outdoor environment, is an essential first step towards developing a sense of emotional comfort. We should offer them an opportunity to explore the environment, to listen to the birds, to look at the scenery, to slow down, and to appreciate the things they see.

Developing our participants' awareness of the elements in the environment should also include some early instruction to help them deal with fears before they become a problem. Participants might or might not ask things like, "Are there poisonous snakes in the water? Are there dangerous bears? What do we need to do to avoid poison ivy? "Asked or not, answering questions like these, teaching about what is and is not dangerous in the environment early in a program can help improve participants' levels of comfort, and give them an opportunity to become concerned about the environment rather than their own safety.

Teaching basic skills early relates to this same concern. Participants in a canoeing program who are afraid they will drown will have very little time to devote to environmental considerations. Basic instruction, in this case in canoeing skills and proper use of a PFD, can help allay such fears, can increase comfort levels, and offer at least an opportunity to appreciate the environment in which the activity is taking place.

5) Teach and live minimum-impact philosophy and techniques.

By personally modeling friendly behaviors, and by explaining the reasons some techniques or behaviors are more friendly than others, we can help our participants practice minimum-impact recreation. Minimum impact techniques are related to specific environments, so it is important to explain to participants how specific behaviors impact on specific environments or elements of the environment.

6) Emphasize interrelationships.

Our behavior does have unexpected outcomes. In order to teach environmentally friendly behavior, it is important for us to think about what some of those outcomes might be.

Leaving food waste in an area accessible to bears, for example, both attracts bears and teaches them that the site is a good place to get food. Once a bear has learned this lesson, it has a tendency to stay near the site looking for food. It may eventually become enough of a nuisance that it must be trapped and relocated or, in a far more likely scenario, killed to reduce the likelihood that it will destroy property or injure someone. This is one negative impact (at least from the bear's perspective) that is relatively easy to avoid by not leaving food out for the bear in the first place.

When we teach about such interrelationships, it is important for us to "make it real" by relating the impacts to things that interest our participants.

7) Weave environmental education and awareness into programs.

Instead of separating our environmental context into a "naturalist program," we can and should weave environmental education into our regular programs. The check points on an orienteering course, for example, might be located at sites with unique or interesting environmental characteristics like a wood duck nesting site, a beaver lodge, and a squirrel nest. Or, a crafts program might focus on painting with natural pigments rather than braiding lanyards. Our programs can become a medium for some very strong environmental messages if we incorporate small lessons into all of our regular activities.

8) Utilize available environmental education resources.

Learn to utilize environmental education resources; they can incorporate environmental education concepts into "regular" outdoor activities relatively painlessly. Resources like Project Wild, Project Learning Tree, and a myriad of environmental education guides provide suggestions and activities that are appropriate in almost any program setting.

9) Don't set up the environment as an adversary that must be overcome.

Be careful of using "survival!" as a descriptor (or an outcome) for any of your programs. If you need to teach survival techniques, do it in your own backyard. Concentrate on environmental sensitivity in the programs you run elsewhere.

As people concerned about the outdoors, we are interested in helping our clients develop an appreciation for outdoor activities and environments. To capture all of the subtleties of an outdoor environment it helps if we focus on recreation that puts our participants into the environment as a part of it -- as a member of a land-community -- rather than as a master over it. We are in the business, whether we admit it or not, of helping people to develop an environmental ethic. One of the steps involved in developing an environmental ethic is developing a sense of personal identity with the natural environment. We can do that, and we should.

Infusing Recreation into Your Environmental Education Programs

Much of the material discussed in reference to incorporating environmental education in outdoor recreation programs also applies when we're working in the other direction -- especially reference to available resources. We don't need to reinvent the wheel if we can borrow a finished one from someone else.

There is a definite push, in a few states at least, to "infuse" environmental education into existing school curricula. Many schools do so by sending their students to environmental education centers. Those centers would do well to infuse some recreation into their existing curricula (see Parker & McAvoy, 1989).

We have long acknowledged that recreation can be a nice compliment to environmental -- or any other -- education. But, one of the outcomes of a study environmental education curricula in Minnesota (Parker & McAvoy, 1989) was a strong suggestion that recreation is more than a nice compliment; it is, in fact, a "Key Component" of effective environmental education planning.

Nonetheless, while the importance of recreation is often acknowledged, recreation is seldom planned as an integral part of environmental centers' curricula. Perhaps it should be.

Rationale

Tehri Parker, at Wisconsin's Central Wisconsin Environmental Center, has identified six good reasons why we should consider including recreation as an integral component of environmental education programs (Schatz & Parker, 1995; Schatz, McAvoy & Parker, 1992).

1) Recreation can be used to acclimatize students to their new environment to the center -- to introduce them to a new environment;

2) Recreation can turn abstract information into concrete experience; use recreation to supplement or reinforce educational concepts. Introduce themes with fun activities;

3) Recreation can provide skills to use the environment without damaging it;

4) Recreational activities can create positive experiences for students, and help them to have fun outdoors -- especially while learning!;

5) Games and other recreational activities can calm down an overly enthusiastic group, or recharge a tired one.

Steps for Action

You don't need an adventure course or climbing wall to use recreation in an environmental center setting. There is no big cost involved, as long as you keep it simple.

1) Develop opening and closing activities for your programs that are recreational in nature. Try using cooperative games or group building activities as well as skits, stunts and game shows.

Start out with cooperative games to set ground for a session on interdependence (like a verbally cued, blindfolded obstacle course). Close in the same way (maybe use a game show based on center information to close session in a fun, memorable way).

2) Plan game breaks into the day's routine. Break for games after meals and between lessons to change the pace of the day.

Plan breaks -- don't save them for times when a session ends early -- activity helps reinforce learning, and keeps the program's fun level high.

3) Incorporate games into your lessons. Use active games to introduce the key points of lessons, or memory games to summarize the key points.

Everything, even water chemistry, can incorporate some form of game (like keeper of the bridge where students must answer three questions to get past the keeper and head off to lunch)

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